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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND THE PREVIOUS QUESTION

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Theological education is rapidly coming to be tested by religious efficiency rather than by inherited precedents. What do we want ministers to do? How can we train them to do it? These are not questions to be answered by teaching young men denominational shibboleths, but by helping them to understand and institutionalize the truths of Christianity. The best theological seminaries are facing practical issues. Therefore they look ever deeper into their mission.

"Biblical theology," says Andrew D. White, "spins its webs out of its own bowels, and all the lesser theological flies continue to be entangled in them." At any rate, one of the reasons why so many fat compends of theology remain dust-laden and forgotten upon library shelves lies here. It is not that they are, as Robert Hall said of Dr. Gill's *Body of Divinity*, "continents of mud, Sir," but that they fail to raise the previous question. Now the previous question is the main question, and the history of theological construction is plentifully besprinkled with instances of failure to ask it. Hence it is that—

Our little systems have their day
They have their day and cease to be. . . .

Why do we smile when that famous humanist and pioneer Hebraist Reuchlin educes the doctrine of the Trinity from Gen. 1:1, *Bereshith bara Elohim*, by taking the word *bara* acrostically: "Abba, Ruach, Ben: Father, Spirit, Son"? Why smile when Martin Luther tells us that Adam and Eve entered the Garden at noon and that the fall occurred about two o'clock in the afternoon? Or,

again, when Dr. Martin tells us that Copernicus is an "insolent astrologer," who upsets the whole biblical account of things? Why smile when we hear that learned Cambridge rabbinic scholar of the seventeenth century, Dr. John Lightfoot, declaring that creation took place in an instant of time, on October 23, 4004 B.C., at nine o'clock in the morning? Or when we read in the *Helvetic Formula Consensus* of 1675 that even the very vowel-points of the Massoretic text were inspired—unaware as they were that the vowel-points were a post-Talmudic invention, not earlier than 600 A.D., at which time, according to their hypothesis, inspiration had long since ceased? Why smile when we hear John Wesley exclaiming that "to give up witchcraft is in effect to give up the Bible"? Or when Dr. Hodge declares the theory of evolution "atheism" and utterly inconsistent with the Scriptures? Why smile, indeed, if we are in fundamentally the same situation?

With the authority method go the closed Canon, the closed system, and the closed mind. Religion is reduced to mimetics, mnemonics, and magic, and

there is no previous question. But with the method of freedom and religious autonomy, authority can be grounded only in a first-hand experience of God, and there is always a previous question. This question continues in every age to occupy men of original temper and fiber, whether in the field of science, philosophy, or religion. They will have none of your short-cut and rule-of-thumb solutions, much less will they waive the previous question at the behest of authority. Now when men of this type become great enough, we worshipers of authority make authorities of them and try to discover some tangent from their systems which can be bent to the support of ours. This is what theologians to a laughable and lamentable degree have done with both scientists and philosophers.

Now in all these important fields of inquiry men are earnestly at work—Eucken and Bergson in philosophy; Metchnikoff and Mme Curie in science; Johannes Weiss and Ernst Troeltsch in theology, to mention only examples. They are bringing to light new values, new appreciations of reality. What shall be our attitude toward the new evaluations? There are two somewhat opposing ideals of theological education, the one primarily putting the student in possession of a method, the other chiefly devoted to giving him a system. The new evaluations are always making trouble for the system; they do not necessarily affect the general method. Now if it is conceded that ability to raise the previous question, or to face it when it is raised by someone else—which is the usual situation—is of importance; in other words, if it is essential that the minister shall be able

to adjust and readjust himself in a world where progress and change are the order; then we should lay emphasis upon that type of theological education which gives the student both the example of so doing and the technique necessary thereto. Indeed, in the modern world, theological education is compelled to raise the previous question in each of its departments.

There has been no very great objection to the raising of the previous question in the field of practical theology—indeed, good teachers have long been accustomed to it in this field. They raised the previous question about the sermon, “What is the sermon for?” Is it primarily to instruct, or primarily to move to action? What do you want to do with your sermon?” But they did not push the question far enough. Your sermon is designed to induce or to contribute to a religious experience; but the previous question is, “What sort of experience?” And this raises the whole issue of the nature of that experience, the motives thereto, and the mode of entering upon it and making progress therein. Now of what use is literary and elocutionary technique until this previous question is answered?

Again, in the practical field, we have been somewhat used to the question of the minister's relation to social needs—whether he should run a soup-kitchen in connection with his church, or conduct a clinic for neurasthenics; and, if so, how? But we have not sufficiently raised the issue of the whole social trend of our times, the issue of organized society, the question of a social goal and an adequate social technique. We have assumed either that the social *status quo* is of divine origin, or that the

matter is none of our business as ministers. But the most perplexing practical questions of the Christian men to whom we minister will lie just here; and organized society will raise the previous question if we do not. Why cannot we pre-empt opinion for the kingdom of God?

And, again in the practical field, we have been used to the presentation of missions. But there is something more fundamental here than the question of either men or money; in fact, there is a whole series of questions behind the mere technique of our propaganda: Whether the missionary enterprise is just an outlet for surplus energy, altruism, and means, or whether it is the main business of the church; whether it is to succeed through a spirit of Christian unity or to fail because of a divided Christendom; whether our denominationalized Christianity and occidentalized policies are to dominate the oriental church or whether it is to be encouraged to develop according to its own genius; whether the goal of our enterprise is just an autonomous church in the Orient, or a new social order.

But there is in the practical field another matter distinctly more novel. Behind the question of Sunday-school grading, materials, and pedagogy—all of which are questions new enough—is the previous question of the religion of a child. “What do you want to do with the child? Do you wish to bring him up never to know alienation from God, or would you have him start with the fundamental conception of being by nature an alien from God, whom only a certain experience of emotional upheaval and readjustment can restore?”

The whole aim and technique of religious education are determined by our answer to that question.

Passing from the practical to the historical field, we find that here again the previous question is not wholly a novelty. Yet there is a new science of history, which goes behind the processional of events, institutions, and personages—the product and culmination of the historical process—into the great subconscious area of history. It seeks to trace there the development of underground and apparently impersonal social movements, out of which the event, the institution, and the personage emerge. This newer method seeks to lay bare the very tissue of life, and to trace its nerves and veins, its processes and functions. Such an inquiry cannot well stop short of a philosophy of history with which to appreciate the past and an adequate social method with which to control the future. Indeed, what does the study of history come to, if it fail to give us a better social method?

It may be reckoned pure gain if the young minister can read his Bible in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. But there is a previous question: “What sort of book is the Bible?” Nor can that question be answered by any dogmatic deliverance whatsoever. The answer must come from the face of the book itself and from the field of history. Only through a proper process of historical and critical study, an actual induction from data, can it ever be derived. If the Bible is to the questioner a timeless insert into history, rather than a product of the operation of God in history, it will make a wide

difference in his method of using it. Indeed, he must return to his atomistic word-study, for historical perspective cannot help him. With the historical view, on the other hand, all linguistic and word-studies become subordinated to an understanding of the actual life-setting and inner unfoldment of the book. Certainly the latter is the more important; for the mind of God is not in text and proof-text, but in personalities and in the sweep and culmination of events.

What, then, of a theological system? Shall there be no system? The making of creeds and the shaping of systems is not only inevitable, it is truly serviceable; we shall never be able to get along without them. However, they lose their usefulness when they become like the proverbial backbone, which was worn in front and wouldn't bend. While the theologian seems now and then to insist that his system is a photograph of reality, time has never taken that view of the matter. It does not seem hard to take an instrumental view of the truths of science, to hold them as hypothetical formulations which may be superseded in time by formulations more adequate. But to think that way about theological formulations is as yet very much the exception. If theology insist upon having a fully articulated system, it will continue to have trouble. Perhaps it would be better to state the great fundamental postulates of the Christian religion than to attempt a full and final system. Such a formulation of the fundamental postulates would serve the needs of religion better than the closed system; for it would itself raise the previous question. And behind the

detail there is a previous question: "What sort of a world is our world?"

If one's religious postulates fail to yield him an answer, and his world prove a mechanistic-deterministic universe, of what use is his beautifully articulated theological logic? Back of your system, then, is the previous question whether reality and theology hold together. Now if the young minister have a view of God and the world large enough to unify the theology and reality, he will be already well on his way toward a working system of theology. The God of religion cannot dwell in gaps; he must be found in the fundamental types and formulations of our human experience. He must be at the base of reality, at the heart of it, in the fiber of it; yet he must be master of it, and neither shut in nor shut out in such a way that he cannot bring about results otherwise unpredicable; he must be free to affect his creatures as person affects person upon the plane of our experience.

"But," someone will remark, "if theological education raises all these questions, it will have its hands full." True enough, it has its hands full. Yet someone has said that "we live by questions as well as answers." Many of the matters of detail must go unanswered; yet, in the main, the previous question will be answered; it will be sufficiently answered, which is the most that can be said of any of life's great queries. The modern theological curriculum aims to point out questions where they most certainly exist; it has neither time nor taste for idle interrogations. And it aims further to point out solutions or the method by which they may be

reached in time. It has a positive dictum, a great experimental deliverance, in answer to the previous question; yet it utters this dictum modestly, in a world where science as well as religion has a right to speak, and where the last word has not been said in either. Thus the task of theological education seems vastly greater than when it was supposedly limited to training in the exegesis of texts and the exposition of finished systems. The text seems more luminous, as being a deposit of real life; but the system seems less com-

PELLING, as being the experimental formulation of a growing faith in individual and community.

After all, the fundamental thing is an experience of the living God as the God of redemption, into fellowship with whose active life of loving and saving service humanity must be brought. And that fundamental fact becomes dynamic and experimental through Jesus; still, as of old, men come to God through him. And it was he who, in an age of rabbinism, taught us to raise the previous question.

THE LITERARY SOURCES AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EPHESIANS

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The more we study Paul the more we see that Paulinism is the application of the gospel to human affairs. The letters of the apostles are not studied productions but are born of actual situations. Any attempt to make these letters more vivid and real is to be welcomed. Dr. Dickinson gives us an unconventional treatment and one that is sure to make men appreciate more fully the apostles' work.

I have been asked by several of the readers of the article on Galatians in the March (1913) number of the *Biblical World* to apply to the phenomena of a similar nature discoverable in Ephesians the same point of view, working hypothesis, and method of treatment therein followed. That point of view is that the writing was first in the forms of life, being occasional letters in a more or less extended correspondence; the working hypothesis is that in passing from the forms of life into the *genre* of literature,

which it now possesses, there is involved a literary process, by which a group of the products of nature have been transformed into a work of literary art; the method employed is that currently known as literary and historical criticism. Our conclusion in the study of Galatians was that the epistle, as we have it, grew out of three previous occasional letters in a correspondence, which the apostle himself subsequently epistolized for service in the churches to promote the culture of the messianic life through